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ABSTRACT

In an impression explanation of counterdefensive attributions, the tendency of subjects is to accept primary responsibility for negative outcomes and to deny credit for positive outcomes. Counterdefensive attributions represent attempts at maximizing the esteem in which observers hold the actor. To test this hypothesis, a 2 x 5 simulation was carried out of Ross, Bierbrauer and Polly's (1974) experiment in which professional teachers gave "moderately counterdefensive" attributions for what they believed to be their successful or unsuccessful teaching performance. Simulation observers (N=100) learned that a particular teacher had either succeeded or failed and that he either did not explain or had offered one of four different explanations for the performance outcome (a highly or moderately defensive or counterdefensive explanation). The results strongly supported the impression management analysis. In both failure and success conditions, observers evaluated the teacher most positively--on ability and personality traits--when he gave moderately counterdefensive attributions. Defensive attributions consistently elicited the most negative observer evaluations. (Author)

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The Social Consequences of Defensive and Counterdefensive Attributions

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Considerable social psychological evidence indicates that individuals tend to make self-attributions for their own positive behaviors and external attributions for their own negative behaviors (e.g., Arkin, Gleason & Johnston, 1976; Federoff & Harvey, 1976; Miller, 1976; Snyder, Stephan & Rosenfeld, 1976; Wortman, Costanzo & Witt, 1973). Theorists have proposed competing motivational and cognitive explanations for these results. The motivational interpretation maintains that, by taking credit for good acts and denying blame for bad ones, individuals can enhance or protect their sense of self-worth or self-esteem (e.g., Miller, 1976). The cognitive interpretation is somewhat more complex (e.g., Miller & Ross, 1975). It contends that findings of differential attributions for success and failure reflect varying combinations of three factors: (1) individuals expect success more than failure and are more likely to make self-attributions for expected than unexpected outcomes; (2) people misestimate the contingency between their responses and outcomes by placing too much emphasis on the occurrence of "positive" (i.e., successful) outcomes (see also Jenkins & Ward, 1965); (3) there is probably a stronger perceived covariation between subject response and outcome for individuals who experience a pattern of increasing success than for individuals experiencing constant failure.

The self-esteem and cognitive formulations are both hard-pressed, however, to explain why subjects in certain studies have given counterdefensive attributions, in which they accept responsibility for failure and deny credit for success (e.g., Beckman, 1973; Feather & Simon, 1971; Ross, Bierbrauer & Polly, 1974). Counterdefensive attributions appear to take esteem or status away from the actor. Moreover, there are no indications that counterdefensive subjects expected failure more than

success or that subjects perceived a stronger relationship between their responses and failure than between their responses and success. For example, consider the Ross et al. (1974) study. These investigators compared the causal attributions of teachers (professional or nonprofessional) following their student's successful or unsuccessful performance on a single test. The authors reasoned that, to the degree self-protective motives bias attributions, teachers should make more situational attributions for failure than for success and that this difference should be greater for professional than nonprofessional teachers. The opposite pattern of results emerged. All subjects made greater attributions to teacher factors in the failure than in the success conditions but perceived student factors as more important in the success than in the failure conditions. This trend was more pronounced for the professional than for the nonprofessional teachers. In another study of professional teacher attributions for poor or good pupil performance Beckman (1973) obtained essentially compatible results.

Bradley (1978) recently proposed an impression management explanation of counterdefensive attributions. In contrast to traditional motivational and cognitive explanations, Bradley focuses upon the social effects or consequences of attributions. According to this view, counterdefensive attributions function as strategic self-presentations designed (consciously or not) to gain approval from others and/or to avoid public embarrassment. Professional teachers in the Beckman (1973) and Ross et al. (1974) studies may have been reluctant to accept credit for good outcomes (and thus appear arrogant or selfish) or to deny responsibility for bad outcomes (and thus appear defensive or irresponsible). Conversely, teachers may have thought that others would view them positively if they accepted primary responsibility for failure (e.g., honest

or ethical) or if they gave primary credit to the student for success (e.g., generous or modest). From this standpoint, teachers used counterdefensive attributions to establish the most favorable possible "social identities" for themselves in the situation (cf. Alexander & Knight, 1971; Goffman, 1957).

To test this interpretation of counterdefensiveness, the present study simulates the Ross et al. (1974) experiment (cf. Bem, 1972). The purpose of the simulation (a 2 x 5 between-subjects factorial) is to assess observer reactions to a hypothetical teacher (Mr. D. W.) who (1) supposedly failed or succeeded on the teaching task used in the Ross et al. study and (2) who then either did not explain or offered one of four different explanations for his task performance. The explanations ranged from the highly defensive and moderately defensive (in which the teacher claims credit for success or denies responsibility for failure) to the moderately counterdefensive and highly counterdefensive (in which the teacher gives the student credit for success or takes responsibility for failure). The moderately counterdefensive attributions correspond to the mean attributions actually given by teachers in the Ross et al. (1974) study. If the impression management hypothesis is correct, then simulation observers should evaluate Mr. D. W. most positively when he gives moderately counterdefensive attributions for failure or success. Observers should evaluate Mr. D. W. most negatively when he gives defensive attributions for failure or success. It is unclear from the impression management hypothesis how observers will evaluate teachers who make extremely counterdefensive attributions. Such attributions may or may not be as effective as moderately counterdefensive attributions in eliciting positive reactions from observers.

A total of 100 observer subjects participated in the research. Ten observers were assigned to each of the 10 cells in the design, each cell representing a particular failure/success and "type of attribution" combination. After being presented the relevant information (carefully based on the procedures of the original Ross et al. study), observers were then asked to form an impression of Mr. D. W. on twenty-two bipolar trait scales sampled from research on "implicit personality theory" (Rosenberg & Sedlak, 1972).

The data analysis involved two basic stages. First, the twenty-two trait scales were submitted to common factor analysis incorporating a varimax rotation. Two major factors emerged. The first factor seems to represent teacher competence (high loading traits include intelligent, competent, flexible, active, imaginative and inspiring). The second factor seems to represent social maturity and sensitivity (high loading traits include ethical, open to criticism, sincere, honest and likeable).

The second stage of the data analysis involved 2 x 5 fixed-effect analyses of variance, using subject scores on the two major factors as dependent variables. Analysis of subject scores on factor 1 revealed two main effects. Subjects perceived Mr. D. W. as more competent when he succeeded than when he failed on the teaching task ($F(1, 91) = 90.5$; $p < .00001$). Type of attribution offered by Mr. D. W. also had a significant impact ($F(4, 91) = 2.95$; $p < .02$). Contrast analyses (using the Tukey A test) indicated that when Mr. D. W. gave highly or moderately defensive attributions, observers evaluated him more negatively than when he offered no attributions ($p < .05$) or moderately or highly counterdefensive ones ($p < .05$ and .08 respectively). The interaction was not significant.

Analysis of subject scores on factor 2 revealed no effect for failure/

success but a very strong effect for "type of attribution" ($F(4, 91) = 35.94$; $p < .00001$).

According to the Tukey A test, moderately counterdefensive attributions elicited significantly more positive evaluations than moderately or highly defensive attributions, highly counterdefensive attributions or simply no attributions (all p's $< .05$). There was also a significant failure/success and "type of attribution" interaction ($F(4, 91) = 2.74$; $p < .05$). Type of attribution had a similar but less pronounced pattern of effects in the success than in the failure conditions.

Overall, the results strongly support the impression management interpretation of the moderately counterdefensive attributions given by teachers in the original Ross et al. experiment. The results are not, however, decisive. For instance, one can argue that the simulation somehow failed to give observers an accurate picture of the Ross et al. experiment (although attempts were made to be as faithful as possible to the details of that study). For this reason, it is probably safest to view the findings as simply demonstrating "plausibility" of the impression management position (cf. Bem's, 1972, discussion of simulations and the support they give to self-perception theory). People sometimes appear to use attributions not only to gain "cognitive mastery of the causal structure of their environments" (Kelley, 1967, p. 193), but also to establish positive social identities for themselves.

Finally, it is worth considering the general methodological implications of the present study. The approach taken here can be used to identify potential sources of "evaluation apprehension" (Rosenberg, 1965) in a wide range of social psychological research (see also Alexander & Knight, 1971). Such information may often be extremely valuable in guiding the design, execution and interpretation of research.

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